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ABSTRACT

This presentation clarifies the role of evaluation in public schools and discusses major problems which block the effectiveness of the role. Evaluation is used in schools to produce information that helps decision makers choose among alternative courses of action. Purpose, rather than methodology, distinguishes evaluation from research. The need for care, precision, and logical thought, however, is common to both. One set of major problems is technical and involves such things as measurement and choice of appropriate analysis techniques. A second set revolves around the need for decision makers to follow a rational approach and to avoid reverting to "gut" feelings in every stress situation. Finally, evaluators must produce pertinent information, in the most useful format, at key points in time. (Author)

RESEARCH IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PURPOSE AND PROBLEM AREAS

by

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It's a real pleasure to be with you here today, and I want to commend all of you for remaining throughout this lengthy session. That demonstrates real interest, plus a good deal of staying power.

Appearing with this group of college professors makes me feel somewhat like Adolph Rupp when he made a speech one time in Indiana. He's the basketball coach at the University of Kentucky, as you may know. When Rupp got up to begin his remarks, he said that the title of his presentation was, "A Stranger in the Promised Land." You'll see on the program that my topic is supposed to be "Research in Public Schools: Purpose and Problem Areas." But after hearing the previous papers, I've decided to change the title to "A Stranger in the Promised Land."

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We've heard a good bit of talk this morning about the difference between "research" and "evaluation". In terms of what I've heard here and read previously, I hate to describe the kinds of activities in which I am engaged, because I'm sure that I will be placed in that somehow less-than-holy category of "evaluator". My feeling is that, so far as public school practice is concerned, the distinction is really rather meaningless. It is a sort of semantic argument. The important thing is what one is doing, and not whether he considers himself engaged in research or in evaluation or in some other kind of activity.

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I had planned to say something about the purpose of "research" or "evaluation" in public schools, but in doing so I'm going to be repeating what has already been discussed here in some detail. As several of our speakers have noted, evaluation is a set of activities conducted in support of the decision process. Research and evaluation exist at the public school level as a service function. It is that, purely and simply, and there is no other reason for its being. There is no research function of intrinsic value; research is of use only to the extent that it can contribute to the primary purpose of educating children.

All of this is easy enough to say and to conceptualize in the abstract. But as those of us who are attempting to do something in the public school setting have learned, actually making research and evaluation play a more central and decisive role in school operation is a difficult task. We talk rather glibly about producing information, but it is extremely difficult to be precise in defining what information is needed in specific cases, and producing it with at least sufficient validity that the product is worth the effort and expense.

The information in each case depends on who the decision maker is, the decision he faces, the areas of uncertainty he needs resolved, and the like. A well-worn way of saying this is that the information needed depends on the questions to be answered. If one can identify the important questions, then he can proceed to determine the information required.

A useful way to approach problem definition in school research, I believe, is to borrow one of the guiding rules used in journalism. I used to be a writer myself, but nobody wanted to read my stuff, so I

had to come into the research business. Journalists speak of four W's and an H. I'll drop one W and say that to define a problem, that is to identify important questions, the school researcher needs to concentrate on three W's and an H as follows.

The first W is Who. Who is the decision maker to be served? This may be anyone, from the Superintendent of Schools to a classroom teacher. It may be a personnel specialist, the curriculum director, or someone concerned with facilities. It can be any professional level decision maker in the public school setting, and the information needs of the person will obviously depend in several respects on the nature of his tasks. One has to approach and deal with different people in different ways. Superintendents, for example, tend to be prima donnas, and a certain style of working with them is necessary. The school researcher must learn something about the particular decision maker and the context of his operation before the other questions stated below can be adequately answered.

The next W is What. What is the nature of the decisions that the person faces, and which specific ones will the research and evaluation specialist try to help him make? The decision maker may have trouble determining which questions are most important. In fact, this is almost always a troublesome point, and a useful way to approach it is to try to zero in on areas of uncertainty. What are the crucial points on which the decision maker is uncertain, and what kinds of information are needed to reduce the uncertainty? Another way of saying this is, what kinds of information will increase the known probabilities that certain outcomes will result from certain actions?

The third W is When. When does the decision maker need the information? That is, at what points in time do the decisions have to be made, and how much lead time is needed with the information in hand. Timing is vital to the public school researcher, and it is essential to his chances of efficacy. It is the issue on which a good proportion of public school research and evaluation effort to date has been rendered impotent. The production of information has been out of phase timewise far too often. It has almost been, in a great many instances, as if information was produced independently of any decision scheduled. I'm a real expert on this point, because I've managed to fail in this way so many times. Many of us have produced beautiful documents which amazed and made envious our fellow researchers, but which unfortunately were not available when the relevant decisions had to be made. As a very common example, we produce beautiful program evaluation documents in the summer. The only problem is that decisions about the program for the next year were made last May. In school research and evaluation work a schedule of decisions must be worked out, and the production of information must be tied to that schedule. Timing is essential.

The H in our three W's and an H is How. How should the information be presented? In addition to making sure that he is producing the information really needed at the time it is needed, the school researcher must be concerned with getting it to the decision maker in the format most useful to him. Those beautiful reports referred to a moment ago often run to 50 or 60 pages, and they're full of esoteric terms and fancy statistics which thrill the hearts of other researchers, but which have no meaning

to ordinary human beings. Reporting must be built around the decision maker's needs. If he needs a one-page summary in simple language, this is what he should get. If he needs five pages which consist mostly of graphics, this is what he should get. It is the decision maker, and not the researcher, whose needs are being met in reporting. If the school researcher wants to communicate with his peers, contribute to the scholarly literature, and the like, this is highly commendable. He should do it as time permits. But it is a separate issue from the reporting which is an integral part of his function as a support specialist to decision makers.

The question of determining which decision maker is to be served is a difficult one. Does a school researcher or evaluator assume an entirely passive posture and react only to requests for information delivered to him? If he does, he is in real danger of dealing mostly with relatively trivial issues. Does he concentrate in a few areas, such as instructional program evaluation, and leave other important ones, such as finance, alone? His resources and his expertise are both likely to be limited, and he cannot be all things to all people.

Research staffs in school systems normally are physically located in the central administration building, and the majority of their contact is usually with central administrative staff. This in itself makes them highly suspect to people out in the schools. Within the central administrative staff, the research and evaluation specialist has the problem of relating to those who hold the key power positions and whose decisions, therefore, really affect what happens in the system. On top of this, we

all know that the most important personnel for affecting real change may not be in the central office at all. They may be in the schools.

Perhaps most of the effort should be concentrated at the local school level. Impact in public education finally boils down to the interaction between the teacher and the pupil. If change doesn't occur at that level, then nothing else really matters. This does not necessarily mean that the researcher must always be working directly with teachers, however. Development of a good reading program with a small but well-organized group might have a much greater effect on pupil-teacher interaction than working directly with a hundred separate teachers. The school researcher faces a dilemma in this respect, therefore. To what extent does he react to the needs expressed by field personnel? How is the right decision maker identified to make this kind of determination?

We've heard some talk about generalizability this morning and about evaluation being an area where generalizability is not a concern. I disagree with this point of view. I think that generalizability must be a concern in conducting the research-like activities in schools. The school research and evaluation specialist could spend all of his time working on specific problems in individual schools and perhaps help a handful of teachers. I could very easily have 500 people engaged in this kind of activity in a system the size of Philadelphia. The cost effectiveness of this operation would certainly be questionable, however. Can a school district afford to have relatively high salaried research specialists

working on specific problems which have no generalizability, at least in the context of the local district? The researcher must focus on the pupil-teacher interaction, but he must also affect change throughout the system to justify the expense of maintaining him.

As already noted, much of the discussion to this point seems to assume something of a passive posture on the school researcher's part, and, while he cannot avoid investing part of his energies in servicing requests, he must find some way to be more intrusive if he is to play a really important and central role in school operation. Few of us at this stage know how this is to be accomplished. Reporting directly to the superintendent and getting a clear commitment from him and other top decision makers to the research and evaluation process is undoubtedly important. At the same time, a working relationship with the field, perhaps through advisory committees, is also necessary.

A big point was made earlier in this paper about the purpose of research and evaluation in the public school setting. It is purpose, I think, that differentiates this type of work from the activities of university researchers and others who are in some way engaged in the research and evaluation enterprise in education. I would question Mr. Stufflebeam on a point he made in this regard. He presented what I would say is something of a false dichotomy. That is, he spoke of experimental research and evaluation activities as two mutually exclusive categories. I would rather name the categories "evaluation" and "research", and I would argue that experimentation can be used in either setting.

I believe, in other words, that methodology is not a distinguishing characteristic between the research and evaluation roles. It seems to me that, as Stake and Denny have noted, the basic inquiry paradigm is the same whether one is engaged in basic research or in evaluation. And I believe that the same set of methodologies must be chosen from. The classical experimental design will be workable much more often in the laboratory, of course, and the proportion that this and other methodologies are used will differ in the different settings. It is the proportion of use and not the available methodologies, however, which differs. Both researcher and evaluator have the same set of methodologies from which to choose.

I am personally convinced that different models, such as the CIPP model of Stufflebeam, Provus' discrepancy model, Stake's judgmental model, the anthropological model that Ianni is developing at Columbia--these different models and different methodologies produce different kinds of information under different sets of circumstances. And I think any one of them should be used when appropriate. Therefore, I believe that the school research and evaluation specialist must be flexible, knowledgeable about many different approaches and the related statistical techniques, and capable of adjusting his activities to specific situations.

All of this puts a premium back on problem definition. One must carefully determine the three W's and the H discussed previously and, based on this, must state clearly the questions to be answered. He must then examine the context in which he will work and determine such things as the amount of control which can be exerted, and the availability of different kinds of data. With this kind of background, he can then select the appropriate methodologies.

I've been talking this morning about problems a school research and evaluation specialist faces in trying to impact the decision process. To be completely honest, I would have to say that we have not had a great deal of success in affecting public school practice to this point in time, and a good part of the problem is ours. Many improvements in our practice are obviously needed.

Even if we manage to work to perfection, however, we can still be impotent, because there's another side to the coin. The other side is the decision makers and their behavior, and this is a side which seems to me to be ignored a great deal in discussions of research and evaluation in education. None of the other speakers this morning, for example, has said anything about how one gets decision makers to use information that is delivered to them. It seems evident to me that decision makers, in addition to giving lip service to the need for research and for more informed behavior on their part, need to learn how to help define information needs and to use the information when it is delivered. School superintendents and others in high administrative positions have strong survival instincts, and few of them got where they are by making use of research-based information. They have habits, reinforced by years of practice, of reacting to crisis situations in terms of their own gut-level feelings and the political realities they perceive. This kind of behavior has worked for them before, and they tend to revert to it when the chips are down. Change in their behavior is needed, and producing this change is part of the task we face.

Research utilization at the public school level is an area which has not been studied very carefully, but which must be addressed in depth, I am firmly convinced, before we can succeed in making the research and evaluation process impact decision making in public schools.

I appreciate very much the attention you've given me, and I have enjoyed being a member of this panel. I hope very much that we can do something to improve research and evaluation practice at the public school level. Thank you.